

Not that I have made no progress in the five months that I have been here, you understand. I have kept a notebook of useful expressions. I can ask the man at the market for a jin (500 grams) of rice or eggs (yes, they weigh the eggs here, and lettuce leaves, too), but somehow it is the unexpected that continues to catch me completely tongue tied. For instance, every now and then I have people burst into my office and let forth a flood of Chinese. Since my attempts (in English) to explain that I do not speak Chinese seemed to go totally uncomprehended, I asked one of my colleagues for the Chinese version: dui bu qi, wo bu hui shuo han yu. Next time it happened, however, I couldn't remember this face-saving formula on the spot, and I couldn't find the piece of paper I had written it down on under the mass of other stuff on my desk, so I tried to mumble what I could remember while the tirade continued unabated. Finally my visitor stopped mid-tone and looked at me wide-eyed. Then he gave me a thumbs-up with a wide grin, said "OK" and disappeared. When I finally found my piece of paper I roughly translated what I had been mumbling as something like: "Excuse me Chinese language, me total idiot, you are welcome"!! Never mind, one failure doesn't make a permanent disaster. I now have my piece of paper sellotaped where I can't lose it, and have managed other similar encounters with more dignity. I am even getting so I can manage without the piece of paper. So, how about that!!

In spite, however, of some small victories, I cannot look back on my semester in China with a great sense of achievement as far as learning the language is concerned. Although Krashen's (1981) Acquisition Hypothesis, whereby comprehensible input is the necessary and sufficient condition for language development, was good in theory, the reality is that

acquiring language this way takes a long time – time an adult usually has not got. It seems clear to me that if I want to learn more than a few basic expressions in Chinese (and I do) I am going to have to set the time aside and attend classes, and discipline myself to do the homework and learning involved. As Schmidt (1983) concluded, for adults to learn a new language successfully they must be prepared for some hard work. So, that's something to look forward to next semester!!

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## Letter from Vientiane

The town is booming. New temples are being built, old temples are getting new coats of gold paint. On the way to the National University of Laos, the rice fields of twenty years ago have been replaced by the spreading town – we pass a Mercedes car showroom, a new museum to first leader of the republic Kaysone Phomivane, and several white mansions behind imposing gates.

In the university's English department the staff are busy coping with the demand for English language, which is so strong that students whose marks are not high enough for the main English course can pay to attend an evening course. In contrast, over in the French department the students receive scholarships to study French and maintain the status of Laos as part of La Francophonie.

Copies of *Cambridge Headway* introduced for English students by a UNESCO project in the late 1980s are well-thumbed. The British-based contexts are even more distant for Lao students than for our students in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, they are definitely lighter in focus than those in the textbooks remaining in the Self Access Centre from a previous project funded by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) when the Berlin Wall was still separating East from West. *Modern English* aimed to present student teachers of English with "a Marxist approach to the contemporary scene in English-speaking countries". In Chapter 8, "Labour movement and labour relations", workers' rights in the United Kingdom are compared with those in the GDR. Some of the students' tasks are pretty heavy – as well as some standard comprehension and grammar exercises these questions I notice these questions:



Students on their way home from school pass the Victory Monument in central Vientiane.

- Explain why the capitalists still want to maintain the idea of class harmony. Try to demonstrate this with ideas from the present time.
- What do you think are the most important qualities and characteristics of a socialist personality?



I think about the political stance in *Cambridge Headway* – unstated and unrevealed without some sort of discourse analysis. The overt approach in *Modern English* does have a clarity which must have been helpful for pre-glasnost learners of English.

The current push for English in Laos means that an English language lecturer with a recent doctorate from an Australian university can supplement her income of about US\$55 with evening teaching and administration duties, to bring her salary to about \$US100 – per month. Yes, you read that amount correctly! The realities of academic life in this small developing country ensure that the contexts in either *Cambridge Headway* or *Modern English* have remained equally far from the lives of the majority of these student teachers and their lecturers.

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## A Wing and a Prayer

I knew very little about TESOL when I arranged to go and teach English in the Karakoram village of Shimshal, in Pakistan in 2000. I was going to wing it, and pray that no one noticed. I had once taught for a year in Bulgaria, but then I had only to follow the government text book and avoid any remotely interesting discussion topics such as sex, politics, and religion. As far as I was concerned, that left nothing.

Having to avoid interesting topics of conversation might be a problem also in Shimshal. The villagers are Ismaili Muslims, liberal by comparison with other Muslims, but Muslims nonetheless. We would be wearing shalwar kameez, baggy, colourful and comfortable, but the dupata, the long veil-like scarf, was optional. No burkas, then.

However, my lack of training and experience were a worry. I read voraciously for a day or two before leaving New Zealand, fatuously hoping to plug the gaping chasm in my knowledge, and arrived in Shimshal still feeling woefully ill-prepared for teaching English to primary school boys.

Shimshal was an interesting place to work, for a westerner. For a start, there was no road into the village, so we walked through the wide, sand-coloured, canyon of a valley for three days. Then there was only hydro electric power, so in winter, when all the rivers froze, there was no lighting. If you wanted to make a cup of tea you lit the fire. There was no piped water, so we fetched water in plastic drums strapped onto our backs with rope. Very uncomfortable.



*Carrying Water*

The subsistence farming community grows wheat and potatoes, peas and barley, and the staple foods are chapattis and potato curry. We had thought about this before travelling in and bought lentils, rice, and tinned food as well as 4 dozen fresh eggs.

I lived in Shimshal for four and a half months with my friend from England, Lynette Willoughby. Lynette taught Science and I taught English. We were given a village house, for privacy. Each morning we strip-washed over an aluminium bowl of water heated on the fire of twigs and scrub. Every third day we washed the dust from our hair. And together we shivered in our down jackets over the frozen puddles and rock hard mud paths to school each morning in temperatures well below zero.

Shimshal people want to learn English very badly, and the literacy rate in the village is much higher than it is for the rest of Pakistan. English for them is the language of business and government. You cannot hope to get a half-way decent job unless you speak fluent English. Those that succeed in becoming confident English speakers leave the village. That's a good thing as the grazing is heavily used and the amount of available land is pitifully small. The possibility of earning money in the village is quite slight, too, so those who are on salaries support large extended families and send their younger siblings and cousins to college. It is not unusual for one earner to be buying clothes and school books for ten or eleven brothers and sisters and financing two or three younger family members to study.

In the schools, Lynette had to reorganise the timetable so that we could be used effectively. The headmaster unlocked his resources cupboard and produced a sheaf of Forum magazines. To my joy, each magazine contained at least one relevant theoretical or practical article about teaching English. The magazines were untouched, as were most of the resources in the cupboard. I discovered why. Having spent one lesson using half a box of pristine picture cards, I returned them to the remainder to find that they were instantly recognisable by the brown muddy deposits left on the edges. Water is scarce, winter is cold, and heating a luxury. So washing is not that common, and many of the children had grimy necks and hands.

The teachers were keen for us to pass on to them some of our professional expertise and had arranged two hours of training every Friday after school. We had fun listening to tapes, role playing Cinderella, script writing, playing games from a wonderful book I had taken along. Lynette